

VIDEO

FAQ

Q What's the best disc format to use in a DVD camcorder?

A DVD camcorders use 8cm discs, which are available in DVD-R/RW, DVD+RW and DVD-RAM formats. However, individual DVD camcorders are usually compatible with only one or two of these three formats. All three types of disc hold around 30 minutes of footage at normal settings.

DVD-R discs can be used only once, while in theory DVD-RW discs can be reused up to 1,000 times. Both types need to be finalised in the camcorder before a compatible DVD player or computer drive can read them. This takes anything from a few minutes to a couple of hours depending on the amount of video on the disc.

DVD+RW is similar to DVD-RW in terms of capacity and reusability, but discs don't need finalising before they will play in a compatible DVD player. They must still be finalised for use in a computer.

DVD-RAM discs don't need finalising, but fewer DVD players support this format.

Seth Barton

Notebooks and video expert

seth@computershopper.co.uk

PINNACLE PCTV USB Stick

★★★★

£41 inc VAT

USB TV adaptors, such as Pinnacle's PCTV USB Stick, are a brilliant idea for notebook owners as they provide a simple way of getting TV on the move without having to lug a giant box around.

While many adaptors ruin this principle with designs that force you to carry around proprietary connectors, Pinnacle has got it right with its PCTV, which is just large enough to accept a full-size RF input. While the white plastic exterior may not suit many notebook colour schemes, it's very sturdy.

Installation is incredibly straightforward: simply plug the stick into a spare USB2 port, insert the driver disc and the rest is automatic. Once installed, it tells you a little about its capabilities and then scans for channels. It took just two minutes to find all the available Freeview and digital radio stations. Unfortunately, there was no easy way of organising them to our tastes other than an arduous drag-and-drop session, and it listed all the scrambled channels, which we had to delete manually.

The basic interface is simple but not particularly user-friendly. The list of available channels is hard to find – we found it eventually by right-clicking on the screen. Channel changing is sluggish, so surfing through them all becomes tiresome.

Picture quality is good, but there's generally little variation in quality between digital TV tuners, and errors tend to be failings of the compressed MPEG2 digital video transmission. However, it had no problem picking up a signal from our antenna.

One of the PCTV's strengths is that it's the first digital TV card we've seen that can capture video directly in DivX format. This format has a massive file space advantage over MPEG2 and is



very useful if you have a compatible DVD or portable media player, as you can transfer your TV programmes directly. You can also capture directly to DVD if you want, with chapters created automatically every five minutes.

Unfortunately, scheduled recording is not as well thought out. The EPG is provided by TVTV, an online listings site that works with Pinnacle's own software. You have to set this up on the TVTV website. Pinnacle gives you a month's free access to the service, but after that it costs £1.25 per month. While this isn't particularly expensive, the option to use Freeview's free EPG would have been better. TVTV provides plenty of unique options, though, including the ability to schedule recordings remotely through the web, or even from a mobile phone.

If you need remote scheduling capabilities or DivX recording, you should consider buying this product. Otherwise, you're much better off with Terratec's Cinergy Hybrid USB XS (see 'Also Consider...' below) as it has better software for normal TV viewing and recording.

Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ✓ Easy installation and setup
- ✗ Hard to use EPG via TVTV online service
- ✗ Changes channel slowly

TV TUNER RF input, MPEG2 and DivX capture, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE 230100031
SUPPLIER www.scan.co.uk, 08707 554747
DETAILS www.pinnaclesys.com

Also consider...

TERRATEC Cinergy hybrid T USB XS

★★★★

£67 inc VAT

PRICE CUT!



Terratec's USB stick receives both analogue and digital TV broadcasts. It also has a breakout lead with a range of audio and video inputs.

It comes with the excellent PowerCinema 4 software. This gives you a Sky+ style fullscreen EPG, as well as media file and DVD playback. The remote is well designed and the buttons clearly labelled.

This tiny TV tuner has all the features you could ever want. Picture quality is good and the software is the best we've seen. You can buy cheaper USB TV sticks, but this is the best.

USB TV STICK RF, line in, composite and S-video inputs, MPEG2 capture format, USB Hi-Speed interface PART CODE E3318
SUPPLIER www.savastore.com 0871 666 1616 DETAILS www.terratec.net
✓ Receives digital and analogue TV ✗ Not the cheapest available FULL REVIEW Dec 2005

HUMAX Duovisio PVR-9200T

★★★★★

£199 inc VAT

Humax's hard disk recorder has two digital tuners to receive Freeview broadcasts, so you

can watch one programme while recording another, or even record two programmes at once. The 160GB hard disk can hold around 100 hours of recordings and enables you to pause and rewind live television.

The interface is excellent, making it easy to schedule recordings from the one-week EPG. The only disappointment is the inability to schedule the recording of an entire series as you can with Sky+.

HARD DISK RECORDER 2x digital tuners, 160GB hard disk, RF input, 2x SCART, RF, composite, stereo phono, optical S/PDIF outputs, USB SUPPLIER www.cwddigital.co.uk DETAILS www.humaxdigital.com/uk
PART CODE PVR-9200T ✓ Two digital tuners; easy-to-use interface ✗ Minor scheduling issues FULL REVIEW Jun 2006



SONY DCR-DVD404E

★★★★★

£483 inc VAT

DVD camcorders have a number of advantages over the more common MiniDV models. For starters there's no tape rewinding or tedious real-time video capturing to be done. What's more, you can simply pop the disc into a compatible DVD player and watch your video straight away (see FAQ, left, for more information on DVD formats).

Sony's DCR-DVD404E is compatible with DVD-R/RW and DVD+RW formats. Discs hold just 30 minutes of high-quality footage, though, so stick to MiniDV if you intend to record long events.

Still pictures can be saved to a Memory Stick Duo card or straight to the DVD itself, which we found particularly convenient as we could store stills and video from the same event.

The DCR-DVD404E has well-positioned and responsive controls, so it's very easy to operate. If you don't want much interaction at all, Sony's easy mode is brilliant as it automates everything and even simplifies and enlarges the information that appears on the display.

The 2.7" widescreen LCD screen has a respectable resolution of over 100,000 pixels and looks bright and accurate. It's also a touch screen and provides access to all the menu options. This is great for novices, as it keeps the number of buttons on the camcorder to a minimum. Those who like to tinker may find it a bit tiring, though, and fingerprints on the screen can be a problem.

Inside the camera is a big $\frac{1}{3}$ " CCD with a total of 3.3 megapixels. This large sensor provides great overall image



quality, with little noise even in dull lighting conditions. In fine weather it produced bright colours and some impressive detail. It can't match budget three-CCD models in good conditions, but it produces better video under more challenging circumstances. It also has an IR mode for shooting in complete darkness.

The camera shoots widescreen video but, like many camcorders, it crops the top and bottom of the image slightly to create a 16:9-ratio image.

We were rather impressed by the stills it took. Flesh tones were accurately rendered, detail was fair and there was little noise. It's easily good enough for smaller prints and saves you having to carry both a camera and a camcorder with you.

Audio quality was also good, with clear voices and no audible sounds from the camcorder itself. The microphone can record in Dolby Digital surround sound, but when we played back the results we could discern little positional audio.

This is a great camcorder that also takes decent stills. You get better video quality for less money from a MiniDV camcorder, but if convenience is a priority, the DCR-DVD404 is ideal.

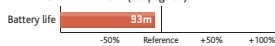
Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ✓ Shoots good video and decent stills
- ✓ Convenient DVD-recording format
- ✗ Pricier than MiniDV models

DV CAMERA DVD-R/RW and DVD+RW storage, 10x optical zoom, $\frac{1}{3}$ " 3.3-megapixel CCD, 2.7" LCD screen, S-video and composite output
PART CODE DCRDVD404E.CEH
SUPPLIER www.pixmania.co.uk, 08700 118117
DETAILS www.sony.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 58)



CHOOSING A... Video Capture Device

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

INPUTS: Composite
OUTPUTS: None
INTERFACE: PCI
HARDWARE COMPRESSION: None
RENDER ACCELERATION: None
Recommended minimum in grey

1 A video capture device lets you record video from a camera to your hard disk ready for editing. Almost all such devices come with software, although its capabilities can vary.

Consider the type of inputs you need. Analogue cameras will have a composite output and probably a superior S-video out too, plus stereo audio outputs. Digital video cameras also include a FireWire port, which allows perfect digital transfers to the PC and often back to tape.

2 Video and audio outputs on the capture device allow you to record edited video back to tape. If you want to see what the results look like on a TV, then get a capture device with outputs on it as well. These devices transmit the editing software's preview display to these outputs for full-screen previews on a TV while you edit.

3 Most capture devices are in the form of PCI cards. If you don't have a spare PCI slot or want a device you can move between PCs, go for a USB or FireWire device. Check that such devices can deliver the video quality you require.

If you're going for USB then make sure you buy a USB Hi-Speed device, as the fast throughput is enough for high-quality video.

4 Digital video needs to be compressed. The cheapest capture devices rely on software to do this, but hardware encoding is more reliable. Choose a device that compresses to MPEG2 or DV AVI, which give better image quality than other video formats. Look for an option to record directly to DVD if your video doesn't need editing.

5 High-end devices provide hardware acceleration for the editing process, allowing transitions and effects in real time. These features will be available only with the bundled editing software, so make sure it's the one you want to use.

FREECOM DVB-T USB Stick

★★★★★

£36 inc VAT

This is the smallest digital TV tuner we've ever seen. It plugs into any USB2 port and is incredibly easy to install. The software's interface isn't brilliant, but it's good enough for watching or recording the odd programme. The EPG is poorly designed and this device will not suffice as a full time PVR.

For notebook users who want to watch the occasional programme, it's ideal. It is cheap and the picture quality is good; however, you may need a rooftop aerial, depending on the level of DVB reception in your area.

TV TUNER RF input, MPEG2 capture format, USB2 interface PART CODE 441CDF DVB-T-USB SUPPLIER www.microwarehouse.co.uk DETAILS www.freecom.com
 Compact and reasonably priced Digital TV only; fiddly interface with poor EPG FULL REVIEW Dec 2004



PINNACLE ShowCenter 200

★★★★★

£143 inc VAT

The ShowCenter 200 streams media files from your PC to your living room using Microsoft's Windows Media Connect. It supports all the most common photo, audio and video file types and is easy to install. Its wired and wireless connections mean it'll fit into any home network. It's the best network media player around.



STREAMING MEDIA PLAYER Requires 1.5GHz PC with Windows XP SP1 and 256MB RAM; SCART, component, composite and S-video outputs, two stereo phono, optical and coaxial S/PDIF audio outputs, USB, 100Mbit/s network, wireless 802.11g SUPPLIER www.dabs.com DETAILS www.dabs.com Wide file support Clunky interface FULL REVIEW Dec 2005